

First-Generation, Low-Income Students

Strategies for success at Lyndon State College

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Lyndon State College is a small, four-year public college in the rural Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. In an effort to improve our first-year retention rate, two years ago we began to analyze which students return to Lyndon for their second year of college. We were surprised that more than 60% of our students were first-generation college students and more than 30% were both first-generation and low-income (FGLI) based on Pell eligibility. With further analysis, we found the first- to second-year retention rate for FGLI students was 54%, compared with 60% for the rest of the population.

With a \$100,000 year-long Project Compass planning grant from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, we established a task force to collect data and identify strategies for improving the success of FGLI students. Funded by the foundation and managed by the New England Resource Center for Higher Education, Project Compass aims to help a select group of public New England colleges and universities improve the success rate of their most underserved students. Project Compass is guided by the premise that by developing systemic initiatives to increase the retention rates of the most underserved students, colleges can increase the chance of success for all students.

During the planning year, we realized Lyndon needed a three-pronged approach to understand and address our retention challenge. First, we needed to become acquainted with the large body of internal and external research on FGLI students. Second, we needed to examine existing pathways to success and explore what interventions could be created to fill the gaps in existing support structures. Finally, knowing that anything we did required the buy-in of the entire campus community—and in effect a shift in campus culture—we instituted a professional development series to begin a campus dialogue about how to serve the needs of FGLI students.

The series brought to Lyndon noted education scholars to give presentations and workshops for faculty and staff. Speakers included Vincent Tinto of Syracuse University, George Kuh of Indiana University, Betsy Barefoot of North Carolina's Policy Center on the First Year of College, and Massachusetts higher

education consultant Peggy Maki. The series provoked greater interest in professional development related to best practices in pedagogy, assessment, advising and meeting the needs of FGLI students. The success of the planning year and the institutional commitment to change led the Nellie Mae Education Foundation to award Lyndon a \$200,000 implementation grant to put in place the following strategies.

1. Data Management & Evidence Development.

Our student data are not compiled in one location or in a common format that allows a complete analysis to determine trends, predictability of persistence or which current interventions have been effective. Until we streamline and coordinate student data, our data tracking, management and analysis capacities will remain limited.

2. Early Alert System. The literature notes that the first two weeks are critical in identifying and responding to indicators that an FGLI student is not on the pathway to success. We determined we needed a web-based early alert system that would streamline how we inform and coordinate a response among the faculty and staff most closely connected to the FGLI student (e.g., instructors, academic advisors, residence hall directors, directors of first-year experience, coaches).

3. College Advising & Mentoring Pilot. A pilot staff mentoring and faculty advising program was designed to address the needs of FGLI students and the inconsistencies in advising and support these students were experiencing. Faculty advisors focus on academic advising and academic adjustment. Staff mentors focus on cocurricular advising and social adjustments to college life.

4. Learning Communities Pilot. Currently, each section of the first-year seminar, developed as an introduction to Lyndon, is linked to another first-year course. But as Tinto noted during his campus visit, "a linked course does not a learning community make." In this first implementation year, we have worked with faculty and student mentors in five of these pairings to help them create true learning communities.

5. Basic Skills Pilot. To address the problem of FGLI students completing fewer college credits by the end of the first year, which is associated with greater attrition, we developed pilot courses that combine math and English basic skills with the required math and English courses, so students get credit while completing remedial work.

6. Professional Development. Professional development continues as a central focus of our Project Compass activities, bringing nationally known retention specialists to Lyndon.

7. Enhanced Campus Communication. To enhance communication across campus regarding pathways to FGLI student success, we initiated a half-day, kickoff event that brought faculty, staff and student leaders together before the start of the 2008 fall semester. We see this becoming an annual tradition critical to achieving the long-term goal of creating a "Learning Commons" defined by a recognition that all members of the diverse Lyndon community contribute to the overall educational experience and success of every student.

8. Community and High School Outreach. Lyndon has begun working with the region's high schools, technical centers, economic development agencies and the private sector to explore the extent to which we can create a "cradle-to-career" model intentionally linking a regional preK-16 education model to the region's economic and workforce development needs.

We are in the early stages of our work. By next fall, we expect to be in a better position to share emerging

trends while making data-driven decisions relating to which strategies should be continued and which should be modified or dropped.

What has become apparent through our Project Compass planning year and the first year of implementation is that identifying and responding to the needs of FGLI students is an exercise in institutional change. Driving this change is an increasingly shared commitment among faculty and staff to help underserved students who have potential for success at the college level, and for whom Lyndon State College exists as a portal to opportunity that might not otherwise exist. We hope our work will enhance the growing knowledge base of how colleges and universities can better serve and embrace underserved populations and that it will provide replicable models.

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